

Korean Shamanism in the Contemporary World *Challenge for Renewal**

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I. Introduction

Korean shamanism has been undergoing a series of challenges to its ability to survive in the contemporary world. During the Japanese colonial period, shamanism was discouraged as a form of nationalist Korean religion. After the disruptive period of the two world wars and the Korean War, Korean shamanism was criticized by many for being associated with an agrarian form of society that was considered to be an anachronistic impediment to modern industrialization. During the 1970s, the *saemaül undong* (community development movement) initiated many social changes that undermined the traditional agricultural life style and its related shamanistic beliefs and practices. Yet policies have been established since that time to encourage certain aspects of shamanistic performance as a national form of art.² However, the inexorable processes of industrialization, urbanization, and secularization have continued to erode the agricultural way of life that provided meanings and functions for traditional

shamanism.

The central axiom of this paper is that Korean shamanism is a valuable tradition worthy of continuation. Therefore, I would like to offer a summary and evaluation of various strategies for renewal that supporters of Korean shamanism might attempt. In most cases, these strategies are already being employed to some degree. However, I am suggesting that an organized movement dedicated to the renewal and accommodation of shamanism to the industrial and emerging post-industrial world might be beneficial. It is not my prerogative to initiate such a renewal movement, since I am not a Korean. Yet I hope that I can offer some suggestions, motivated by a sincere appreciation for the shamanic tradition, that others may take up if they wish to.

While I advocate for an organized and conscientious effort, I do not mean to imply that cultural or spiritual renewal should or can be accomplished solely by rational planning on the part of any elite group. Popular cultural movements need to arise from a society

*This article is dedicated to the memory of *Nongak* Master Kim Pyōng-sōp¹.

with a high degree of consensus if they are to be durable and significant. Likewise, spiritual renewal can be genuine only when it arises from heartfelt commitment and insight. Therefore, my proposal for renewal of Korean shamanism is offered only in the hope that it might stimulate further cultural and spiritual reflection.

First, I will define what I mean by the term "shamanism" and specify what its possible contributions to contemporary society might be if it succeeds in renewing itself. Secondly, I will discuss briefly six alternative strategies for continuing and renewing the shamanistic tradition of Korea.

II. Korean Shamanism and Its Possible Contributions

I am using the term "shamanism" in a broad sense to include the activities and beliefs directly linked to religious specialists, such as the *manshin* (*mudang*) and *paksu*, as well as the animistic cultural context, sometimes referred to as *musok*. This broader animistic context is the cultural matrix that includes diverse folk religious and magical practices such as *nongak* (agricultural ritual music). Scholars of Korean shamanism have identified several themes that are common to these diverse expressions of *musok*. I believe that Korean shamanism could make important contributions to contemporary cultural development by highlighting these themes for consideration by Koreans and other people.

The first theme is that of harmony. Korean shamanism emphasizes the importance of maintaining, protecting, and restoring harmony in relationships between human beings and the spirit-filled natural ecology.³ The individual is understood to be interdependent with his or her human kin and community as well as the spirit powers of nature. This view leads to a shamanistic ethic of harmonious relations between human beings, including the ancestors, and the powers of nature. The shamanistically oriented person does not simply harvest wild mountain ginseng (*insam*)

at will, for instance. The ginseng hunter needs to pray to the mountain spirit (*sanshin*), obtain his permission, and follow the visionary revelation that leads to the location of the ginseng.⁴ The ideal image of harmony is well portrayed in the *nongak* dance called *obangjin*, the dance of the five directions. In this dance, the performers weave through the four cardinal directions and the cosmic center, thus celebrating and reinforcing the unity of all things. In the pantheon of the shaman, the spirit powers of the five directions are depicted as generals.⁵ This perspective of interdependency and the ethic of harmony could link the traditional Korean folk view with contemporary social movements based in ecological, holistic, and systemic thought.⁶

The second theme is that of ecstasy (*shinmyōng*). *Shinmyōng* literally means experience of the spirit's descent upon the person.⁷ The shaman experiences this first during her initiatory illness (*shinbyōng*) caused by spirits who wish to transform her into a shaman. After her initiatory *naerim kut* and training under a master shaman, she learns to apply the resultant power to the healing and advising of her clients. *Shinmyōng* is also a characteristic of the truly inspired dancer or *nongak* player. The experience of *shinmyōng* reveals that human beings and the realm of the divine can have intimate contact and that this contact is a source of healing and joy. Indeed, the experience of *shinmyōng* can be seen as a resolution of the otherwise unavoidable suffering (*han*) that seems to be a characteristic of the Korean *minjung*, the masses who have been disadvantaged and oppressed. The experience of ecstasy also opens up mental capacities, such as visionary experience, that can imbue a person's life with great significance and meaning. Thus, the shamanic experience of ecstasy can remind contemporary people, who tend to become preoccupied by a secular world view and materialistic pursuits, that the divine is potent and accessible and that the mind has capacities for insight that transcend the limits of strict logic and reason. These concerns in fact are central to the growing influence of transpersonal and spir-

itually-oriented psychologies in the contemporary behavioral sciences.⁸

A third theme is that of practical service. The shamanistic preoccupation in Korea is primarily with providing benefits and healing to people. The shaman is enjoined to use her spiritual powers for the service of others, or she will eventually suffer retribution from the spirits.⁹ Since people's health and well-being are dependent upon harmony with the spirit powers, the shaman's primary task is to safeguard or restore correct relationships. This theme of practical and service-based spirituality offers a valuable lesson for those of our contemporaries who may pursue self-fulfillment for their own narcissistic pleasure, rather than for the healing of others.

These three themes of harmony, ecstasy, and service are valuable alternatives to the themes of anomic social fragmentation, materialistic banality, and narcissism in the contemporary world. Yet in order for Korean shamanistically oriented person does not simply harvest wild mountain ginseng (*insam*) at newly emerging post-industrial global society. Shamanism has demonstrated its resiliency and adaptability for millenia. It has transformed from a Siberian hunting-herding form to an agricultural form. It has survived discrimination during the Chosön dynasty, the Japanese occupation, and the post-war period. Some have said that shamanism is the true and enduring heart of the Korean populace, the *minjung*. If so, Korean shamanism deserves re-consideration for its potential to contribute to the ongoing development of Korean culture.

III. Alternatives for Survival and Renewal

The first three alternatives involve continued survival in a form reduced from a living tradition to a cultural artifact. These alternatives are: shamanism as art form, commercial entertainment, and museum display. These alternatives strip elements of shamanistic performance from the original spiritual and socio-cultural context. The last three alterna-

tives are: interreligious convergence, development of support networks, and internationalization. These have the potential to produce creative renewal because they could expand the shamanic way, giving it new meanings and elaborations relevant to the contemporary situation.

1. Shamanism as Art Form

Elements of shamanism are currently being changed into forms of artistic expression. For example, *nongak* has become popular as a music and dance performance for sophisticated urban audiences.¹⁰ In this case, *nongak* is removed from its original role as accompaniment to agricultural work, play, and shamanic ceremony. It shifts from a community-based grass roots form of performance to a specialized urban artistic performance. Similar changes are occurring for shaman rituals (*kur*) that are performed on stage. The advantage of this strategy is that the performance aspect of shamanism is tailored to urban, secular and even international audiences. In fact, the technical quality of art forms may become refined as the purely aesthetic aspects are elevated in importance over religious function. This alternative is valuable as it enriches the artistic life of Korean and other societies. The main problem with this alternative is that it reduces the community experience of the sacred to a more individualistic experience that is often devoid of spiritual significance. As Eliade, the historian of religions, has pointed out, this approach dims the religious consciousness of participants.¹¹

2. Shamanism as Commercial Entertainment

This alternative is similar to the first except that the degradation of religious experience is even more extreme. Here, even the aesthetic dimension is sacrificed for the sake of commercialism. This alternative has the advantage of providing mass-consumable entertainment. The disadvantage is that the sacred form is reduced in religious and aesthetic

significance.

Certainly, shamanic performance in Korea has always had an entertainment dimension which enhances community bonding and the sense of intimacy with the spirit world. Indeed, derivative performing arts, such as *nongak*, have been engaged in entertainment activities for centuries. Yet this form of entertainment continued its connection with the religious and cultural context of shamanism.

3. *Shamanism as Museum Artifact and Anthropological Report*

This alternative preserves records and objects concerning shamanism for scholars and the general public to examine. There are already of course many artifacts housed in Korean and international collections. In addition, there has been a large increase of anthropological reports and analyses concerning Korean shamanism in the past twenty years. These efforts preserve fascinating information about shamanism and lend great insight into Korean history and culture. However, they do not preserve shamanism as a living tradition. Again, objects and events are presented to audiences outside of a religious context.

A possible side effect of these three alternatives is that they could increase general public acceptance and appreciation of elements derived from shamanism, and thus encourage a wider tolerance of shamanism as a living tradition. The danger is that people may rest content with these reduced forms while permitting the elimination of shamanism itself.

4. *Shamanism in Interreligious Convergence*

Interreligious convergence refers to the interaction, mutual accommodation, and combination of elements between different religious traditions. I avoid using the term "syncretism" because for some Christians it has the connotation of doctrinal contamination or even heresy.¹² I am referring to a creative and intentional process of mutual

enhancement between religions, rather than a superficial mixing. Openness to interreligious convergence is common in traditional Korean culture, despite the periods of conflict between the various religions.¹³ It's often been said that Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism are the complementary and mutually inclusive perspectives that together enrich East Asian societies. In Korea, these three traditions have commingled with each other and shamanism. In this discussion, I will focus upon the possibilities of convergence between shamanism and Buddhism, and shamanism and Christianity, since these religions claim the largest formal membership in contemporary Korean society.

Korean shamanism and Buddhism have been engaged in mutual convergence since the Three Kingdoms Period, for nearly two thousand years. Shamanism seems to have been quite comfortable incorporating Buddhist symbols into its own system. For example, many shamans regard Buddhist deities as specially esteemed spirits in their own pantheon.¹⁴ Indeed, some shamanic practitioners now refer to themselves as *posal*, the Korean term for Bodhisattva or Buddhist devotee.

Although some Buddhist purists disdain incorporation of shamanistic elements, in actual practice Korean Buddhism has incorporated much of shamanism. The shamanistic features of Korean Buddhism are clearly evident in the *Samguk yusa's* accounts of the magical feats of monks during the Three Kingdoms Period.¹⁵ Currently, Buddhist temples usually have special shrines dedicated to the mountain spirit (*sanshin*) and the seven-stars spirits of the Big Dipper (*ch'ilsōng*), for example. In Korean Zen (*sōn pulgyō*), there is a practice known as *kido*, or special energy practice. As taught by the Korean-American Zen Master, Seung Sahn Son Sa Nim, *kido* alternates periods of quiet sitting meditation with periods of extremely intense group performance of percussion and chanting, reminiscent of *nongak* and shamanic *kut*.¹⁶ The intent is to produce an experience of intense inner energy that snaps the person out of dualistic consciousness into a glimpse of

nirvanic awareness.

The advantages of convergence between shamanism and Buddhism are several. Buddhism benefits by increasing its acceptability to the traditional folk population. It also keeps its transcendental concerns rooted in the earth and mountains of everyday life. Further, Buddhist techniques for exploring expanded states of consciousness, as in *kido*, are supplemented. The disadvantages are that shamanism could become absorbed into Buddhism and lose its identity and role as an autonomous religious system. On the other hand, the profound understanding of Buddhism could be reduced to superficial magical practices if shamanism were incorporated in a careless manner.

Although this process of Buddhist shamanic convergence has been going on for many centuries, it seems to me that shamanism could benefit further from a more serious, organized, and careful dialogue with Buddhism at a philosophical level. Such a dialogue might provide shamanism with a metaphysical and philosophical sophistication that would increase its relevancy and appeal to contemporary Koreans.

Convergence with Christianity is perhaps more problematical. Korean Christianity has been strongly influenced by conservative theology that emphasizes a mutually exclusive relationship with shamanism.¹⁷ It is possible that Catholic and Protestant efforts to accommodate ancestor veneration could serve as precedent for an intentional process of incorporating insights from shamanism into Christianity. Despite opposition from members of Christian hierarchies, and even without planned interreligious dialogue, Korean Christianity seems to have taken on many qualities of shamanistic experience.¹⁸ For example, the widespread Korean charismatic movement emphasizes faith healing and possession by the Holy Spirit, which is analogous to shamanic *shinmyōng*. In fact, there are documented cases of *manshin* who converted to Christianity, becoming charismatic leaders.¹⁹

For shamanism to incorporate doctrinal

elements of Christianity may be particularly difficult, especially given the alien concept of Christ as the only incarnate son of a Supreme Being. The shamanization of Korean Christianity seems primarily to be an unplanned process, due to the cultural coloration of Christian experience by Koreans of shamanic background and the informal syncretism practised by some Korean "Bible-women".²⁰

Korean Christianity might benefit from interreligious convergence by becoming more sensitive to the importance of harmony with the spiritual powers of nature and the ancestors. The ecstatic aspect of shamanism could enrich the charismatic aspect of Christianity. The immanent focus of shamanism could strengthen the incarnational theology of Christianity. Korean shamanism might benefit from systematic interreligious dialogue by placing its emphasis on healing ministry within a systematic doctrine of love. It might also be stimulated to explore further the concept of a Supreme Being. As the Christians have adapted the shamanic concept of *han-unim*, the sky god, to refer to the Supreme Being, so shamans might reconsider the significance of this *hanūnim*.²¹ While Christian-shamanic dialogue and convergence may seem difficult, there is a successful precedent in contemporary interreligious cooperation between some Catholic clergy and Lakota (Sioux) medicine people in the United States.²² Perhaps this effort could be examined for its relevance to the Korean situation.

5. Development of Support Networks

Korean shamanism has been notable for its lack of formal religious organization, such as a hierarchy of clergy or systematized doctrine. This has allowed shamanism to be responsive to various historical changes and local community circumstances. Yet this characteristic also makes it difficult for shamans and their supporters to mount organized self-defense and advocacy efforts when they encounter difficulties. It also hampers the development of philosophical sophistication.

One strategy for renewal of shamanism, therefore, would be the development of support networks to promote the survival of shamanism and to engage in the creative renewal of its beliefs and practices. Leadership of such networks might include representatives from the present shamans organization centered in Seoul, designated national human treasures who perpetuate shamanic arts, and university educated shamans and supporters of shamanism. The advantage of this alternative would be the facilitation of advocacy and self-protection, the encouragement of systematic efforts regarding the previously described alternatives, and the elevation of philosophical and theological discussion from a shamanic viewpoint. The disadvantage of this alternative would be the possibility of institutional rigidity if such networks attempted to formalize an organizational hierarchy and doctrines.

6. *Internationalization of Korean Shamanism*

This final alternative is the most speculative. It involves an exploration of common ground between Korean and other cultural forms of shamanism in order to establish an international system of mutual support and sharing of insights. This could lead to many unforeseen developments in the beliefs and practices of Korean shamanism. Such a process has already begun to connect shamanic teachers from Native American Indian, Australian aboriginal, and other indigenous cultures through educational institutions in the United States, such as the Ojai Foundation in California.

An advantage of this strategy would be the establishment of international appreciation and support for Korean shamanism. As Korean shamanism grows in international stature,

domestic support for it may grow as well. Further, Korean shamanism could develop in religious and philosophical sophistication through the process of cross-cultural dialogue. Transcultural themes common to diverse forms of shamanism could be clarified with respect to the culture-specific form of Korean shamanism. The fact that these themes are conveyed through diverse forms can encourage supporters of Korean shamanism to explore creative transformations of the traditional Korean expressions, making them more relevant to contemporary industrial and post-industrial circumstances. A disadvantage is that this strategy could cause additional de-stabilization of traditional beliefs, without offering a suitable replacement. This strategy, along with interreligious dialogue and convergence, requires high levels of philosophical sophistication, religious self-confidence, and doctrinal flexibility among participants.

IV. Conclusion

I have asserted that Korean shamanism upholds insights and practices that are valuable and worthy of continuation. However, continuation of shamanism in the contemporary socio-cultural context is challenged by the necessity to accommodate to changes of life style and world view. I have suggested six alternative strategies for the survival and renewal of Korean shamanism, considering some advantages and disadvantages of each. It is my hope that these suggestions may offer some stimulation and encouragement for contemporary Koreans to take up the challenge for renewal of their indigenous and most ancient tradition.

NOTES

1. Master Kim Pyōng-sōp was regarded as one of the finest *nongak* performers of Korea. His music was discussed in several issues of

Korea Journal including the following articles by Keith Howard: "An Introduction to Korean Folk Bands and Folk Songs", Vol. 7,

No. 8 (August 1987), pp. 28-48; "Nongak, the *Changgu* and Kim Pyōng-sōp's *Kaein Changgu Nori* (I)", Vol. 23, No. 5 (May 1983), pp. 15-31; "Nongak, the *Changgu* and Kim Pyōng-sōp's *Kaein Changgu Nori* (II)", Vol. 23, No. 6 (June 1983), pp. 23-34. It was my great privilege to study under his guidance in 1976 and 1977. As he passed away in 1987, I wish to honor his spirit by this dedication. With his passing, and with the passing of all masters of the Korean shamanic tradition, much beauty and wisdom is lost. There are too few students who continue the teachings in earnest. This fact impressed itself upon me with great sadness during my last conversation with Master Kim in the summer of 1987.

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